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ABSTRACT

To estimate variables describing identity change, Finnish housewives with work skills were interviewed after their children entered school. Thirty mothers who had remained at home with their preschool-age children were interviewed twice: once when their youngest child was 8 years of age and again when the child was 11. Of these mothers 15 were working fulltime, 4 halftime, and 11 were at home. Participants were selected on the basis of the following criteria: they were between 30 and 40 years of age, had some vocational training but not an academic education, and were married to men with middle-class incomes. During both interview sessions, each woman was questioned individually about how she experienced different aspects of her life. During the second session, the husbands and the youngest children were also interviewed. Subsequently, the women were classified into three groups according to how far they had proceeded in the process of redefining their identities as workers and mothers. The first group had not yet begun the process of redefinition, the second had started but not completed, and the third had completed the process. This identity change was estimated with respect to three levels: cognitive, emotional, and action. Ratings on these levels were taken separately for mother identity and for work identity. Contrary to expectations, subjects exhibited change first on the action level, second on the cognitive level, and third on the emotional level. Additional results are discussed. (RH)

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THE HOUSEWIFE'S PROCESS OF IDENTITY CHANGE IN COGNITION, EMOTION AND ACTION

Method

30 mothers, who had stayed at home before their children were at school, were interviewed twice: when their youngest child was 8 years and when 11 years old. The mothers were chosen from the files of the population office in the city of Turku, according to the following criteria: they were 30-40 years of age, had some vocational training but not an academic education and their husbands had middle class incomes. 15 mothers were now working fulltime, 4 halftime and 11 mothers were at home. Both times the women were interviewed individually for about four hours about how she experienced different aspects in her life. The second time the husbands and the youngest children were also interviewed.

The interviewers, using taped interview and rating scales, estimated variables describing the mother's process in identity change after her children are at school. The interrater reliability was checked and was high.

The overall picture of the mothers

The women were classified, according to the overall ratings, into three groups according to how far they had proceded in the process of redefining their identity. Each group included about one third of the women. Analyses of variance give many significant differences between the groups, some of which are briefly given in what follows. The first group - ten mothers, of whom four were working - had not started the process of

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redefining their identity. They saw their role and life as the same as when the children were small. They did not have more free time and their tasks had not changed. They saw the children grow, but experienced this as anxiety provoking. One mother expressed this: "Children growing up is like death". They did not encourage their children's independence but wanted to be irreplaceable at home. Their children were in fact more dependent on them, and these mothers were thus more tied than the other mothers. They said motherhood was the most important aspect of being a woman. Their ideal mother supresses her feelings, is always patient , denies her own needs and sacrifices herself. These mothers said they were completely satisfied with their life and did not wish anything to change. However, according to the interviewers' ratings, they were depressed and had little energy. They could sigh when saying they were completely happy. One of the mothers said she was feeling better after starting to look after a small baby, three were planning to have another baby, and some were waiting to become grandmothers.

The second group - 12 mothers, 5 of them working - had started the process, but had not completed it yet. They were depressed and they said their life was full of conflicts. They were dissatisfied, on a conscious level, with their life and wished for a change. They thought and talked much about their unsatisfactory life situation, but did not dare to change it. Those still at home wanted to start working, mostly for stimulation. One mother said: "The walls fall upon you when you are always alone at home." They felt that motherhood did not provide self-confidence any more. The children were often experienced as a burden, preventing their mothers from changing. According to the interviewers' ratings the relationships between these mothers and their children were most distant. Even the marital relationships had changed for the worse since the wives felt that their husbands were not supporting their wishes for changes.

The third group - 8 mothers, 6 working - had worked through and redefined their identity as a worker and a mother. They

had now new personal areas in life, such as work and/ or new interests and friends. They liked their life now. They said they had reappraised all aspects of their lives, gone through changes and gained greater self-confidence. They had "learned to know themselves and their own needs". They said that the process of redefining their identity as a mother and a worker had involved every aspect of their life, and that a total life change had been necessary. Even if they were now satisfied with their life they said very much about the difficult times they had been through. They said that their life had been full of conflicts and the process had been painful. Now they experienced themselves as more confident even as mothers again and enjoyed their relationship with their children, being more "friends" with them. The children had been given more responsibility at home and did their share of housework. According to the interviewers' estimation the relationships between the mothers and the children were closest in this group.

Levels of identity change: cognitive, emotional and action levels

The identity change was also estimated on three different levels. The rating about the change on the cognitive level comprises how much the mother has been thinking about and discussing going to work, the motives for it and its consequences, as well as the changes noticed in motherhood.

The rating about the change on the emotional level comprises how much the mother has been able to leave her old role as a mother of small children and how much she is able to find satisfaction through the new aspects of her life, e.g. being a mother in a new way, new interests, her work.

The rating about the change on the action level comprises the amount of change in work, i.e. whether the mother has taken a job and what kind of a job.

The ratings were done separately for the mother identity and the work identity. The action level of mother identity

was not rated because the actual work at home did not vary much. The ratings were done on a five point scale: 1 = no change at all - 5 = the process of redefinition finished. The ratings of the second interview data were done independently by those who had done the second interview and also by those who had done and rated the first interview. The interrater reliability was high.

The pattern of changes

We expected to find the following pattern: first the mother would think and ponder about changes in her life and about going to work, second she would work through the changes emotionally and third, finally, she would be ready to take a job. This, however, was not the typical pattern. The means of the ratings of the different changes in Table 1 show that

- Table 1 -

the mothers have gone furthest on the action level, next on the cognitive level and last on the emotional level. It seems that many long-time mothers first go to work without pondering much and then start thinking and working through the changes brought about by the chanced life situation.

Advancement in the redefinition process between the interviews

The mothers were interviewed the second time three years later. Most mothers had advanced in the predicted direction on the different levels. Only five mothers had not advanced at all, but they were already on the highest level at least at some of the levels. Table 1 shows also the means for the second interview ratings. Regarding the pattern of changes of working identity the mothers have now advanced most on the cognitive level.

Support factors for different levels

At the first interview the mothers were asked about the kind of support they had received from other people and what had helped them in their process of identity change. The support mentioned by the mothers was related to the mothers' rated changes. The mothers who had advanced furthest on the action level emphasized support given by their female friends. The women who had advanced most on the cognitive level emphasized significantly more than those who had not advanced on this level support given by their husbands. They experienced that the possibility of having long talks with their husbands about going to work had been helpful. The women who had advanced most on the emotional level, had had mothers who had been working themselves and they had also worked longer before marriage and children than the mothers who had advanced less.

The child's point of view

In the second interview the youngest child, who was then 11 years old, was also interviewed. Questions were asked about how they experienced their school and home. Most children said that they wished that their mothers would be at home so she would be there when they come from the school. However, those mothers who were furthest on the emotional level on the redefinition process, had children who were most positive towards school. The children who were least positive towards school had mothers who had advanced least on all the levels. According to the children those mothers who had advanced farthest on the emotional level were most positive towards the children's friends, while those who had advanced least wanted to control the company of their children. According to the children's drawings about family, family atmosphere of the families where the mother had advanced furthest on the cognitive level, was the warmest.

The husband's point of view

The husbands were interviewed at the second interview. They were asked about their own personal life as well as how they experienced their family, what they thought about their wives working, etc. No differences were found between husbands whose wives had not advanced, were in the middle, or had finished the redefinition process as to their attitudes towards their wives working. However, the husbands whose wives were still at home, seem to be the healthiest of all. They have least psychosomatic complaints, they are the most ready to talk and least insecure about themselves. According to Wartegg drawing test their self-image is the most integrated and they treat anxiety in the most adequate way. In the family-Rorschach the other family members accept their suggestions most. The husbands whose wives score low on the cognitive and emotional level of the identity redefinition process, idealize motherhood least and have a realistic attitude towards motherhood. They are, according to the Wartegg data, the most sensitive of all. They are the least devoted to their own work but have many hobbies and personal interests. They seem like good persons as husbands.

The husbands whose wives are in the middle of the redefinition process regard themselves as worst as fathers and partners, and they also think that their wives value them little as fathers, partners and men. They are the least satisfied with their lives. They seem to be in the middle of a crisis, as their wives are. They are most willing to talk to the interviewer and eagerly take the chance to ponder and analyse their life and relationships to the other family members. For them their work means more than to other husbands and they concentrate on their work.

The husbands whose wives have come farthest on the action level are those with most psychosomatic complaints and they are the most reserved and insecure according to the interviewers ratings. Their self-image is the least integrated and they are the least adequate in treating anxiety. The husbands whose

wives have come farthest on the cognitive and emotional level, idealize motherhood most. According to the interviewers' ratings they are the most defensive about their self-esteem. According to the ORT projective test they are the least adequate in handling anxiety when left outside a group. The only expected results for this group were that these husbands said that their marital relationship had become better during the recent years. They also , of all the men, liked most doing household tasks traditionally considered as women's work.

How should we understand the results for the first and the third groups of husbands? Why are the husbands of the wives who do not work or have gone least far on the emotional or cognitive level of the identity redefinition process most healthy psychologically and seem like the most adequate as fathers and husbands? Are they so good and secure as husbands that their wives are happier at home than other women and therefore find it most difficult to leave home?

Why are the husbands of the women who have come furthest on the redefinition process the least healthy and secure husbands? Have the years at home with these husbands been so difficult that it is these wives who have had the needed motivation to get out of the home and been able to break out after the many years at home?

Or do the ratings and the data from the psychological tests like Wartegg and ORT reflect the present life situation of the husbands rather than their permanent personality characteristics? Do those husbands whose wife is still at home or has not detached herself from her old role as a mother have a more secure life situation than the husbands whose wife does not devote herself completely to the home any more?

Table 1. The means of the estimated changes of work- and mother identity on the levels of action, cognition and emotion at the first and the second rating three years later. The scale for rating: 1 = no change from the children's preschool period, 2 = little change, 3 = some change, 4 = much change, 5 = the process finished.

	Working identity		Mother identity	
Level	1.rating	2.rating	1. rating	2.rating
action	3.37	3.48	-	-
cognition	3.23	3.70	2.83	3.30
emotion	2.57	3.33	2.30	2.78

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